

SYSTEMIC REFORM AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Like many other public institutions, schools in the United States face a “crisis of legitimacy” as they come under attack for bureaucratic inefficiency and poor student achievement (Cibulka, 1997, p. 317). In an increasingly turbulent environment—amidst tough international competition, budget deficits, limited resources, and an aging, increasingly impoverished, and ethnically diverse population—schools are under intense pressure to produce results (Reyes, Wagstaff, & Fusarelli, 1999; Rowan & Miskel, 1999). As a result, the federal and state governments have become increasingly involved in education through mandates and the implementation of top-down command and control structures, such as higher standards, mandatory testing, and accountability all tied to a system of sanctions and rewards. These efforts represent “a growing attempt [by policymakers] to develop more coherent education policy” (Rowan & Miskel, 1999, p. 379).

Student achievement, particularly in urban schools, remains abysmally low, and the persistence of achievement gaps among ethnic groups has become a concern of federal and state policymakers. Drawing upon lessons learned from corporate restructuring, policymakers are seeking to reshape educational organizations, with greater attention toward more rigorous performance standards, outcomes, and accountability measures (Kanter, 1989). Several researchers have observed that, “Major efforts are under way to mobilize much more consistent and powerful direction for instruction from state or national agencies [including the creation of] state and national curricula and tests to pull instruction in the same direction” (Cohen & Spillane, 1992, pp. 3-4). State-level systemic reform initiatives include school report cards, expanded use of student test scores (including exit tests), and outcomes-based accreditation strategies and curriculum frameworks.

A good example of an effort by state policymakers to initiate organizational change through systemic reform is found in Kentucky. In 1990, the Kentucky state legislature passed the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA), a comprehensive systemic overhaul of the state’s educational system, with heavy emphasis on student and school accountability (Pankratz & Petrosko, 2000). KERA consists of a system of interlocking policies—including new curriculum (content) standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessments—all linked to a performance reporting system of rewards and sanctions tied to student achievement (Cibulka & Derlin, 1995; Minorini & Sugarman, 1999).

Under the banner of systemic reform, the pressure by federal and state lawmakers to reform education through enhanced performance reporting systems is producing greater impetus for organizational change by challenging and possibly altering organizational relationships among federal, state,

and local policymakers. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of amendments to Chapter I, the major federal compensatory education program, included an emphasis on performance accountability by requiring districts to identify low performing schools and develop comprehensive school improvement plans (Herrington & Orland, 1992). These amendments were often in conflict with the policy preferences of local school officials.

With passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, federal lawmakers strengthened the accountability provisions, mandating that all public school students nationwide in grades 3-8 be tested in reading and math, with testing in science to be added within the next few years. NCLB requires that Congress receive annual state reports of student progress and mandates that persistently low performing schools and school districts submit improvement plans for review by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). Each state's accountability plan must be approved by the USDOE. Furthermore, each state will set Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets that every school must meet to reach one hundred percent proficiency at the end of twelve years. Test scores will be broken out by economic background, race/ethnicity, English proficiency, and student disability.

In effect, "national report cards" will be issued to each school and district in the United States. School districts will be rewarded for demonstrated success (in the form of greater federal dollars), while failing schools and districts will be punished (in the form of reconstitution and expanded opt-out provisions). NCLB requires districts to provide tutoring and other special services to students who fail to meet the standards. According to Boyd (2003), "NCLB's requirement that students in 'failing schools' be given the option of obtaining supplemental services or transferring to successful schools links NCLB's standards-based accountability to market-based reforms" (p. 10).

With an emphasis on higher state standards, testing, and accountability, NCLB and its predecessors represent top-down strategies to improve student achievement through tightened centralized control (in terms of mandated, targeted outcome measures), while ostensibly leaving the "how you get there is up to you" question to local school leaders. However, whether such top-down/bottom-up strategies are workable is an unanswered question for policymakers and educational leaders. Furthermore, the push by federal and state lawmakers to reform schooling (in effect, to force organizational change) through systemic reform initiatives raises a number of other important empirical questions, including whether state and local school leaders have the institutional capacity (including necessary resources) to implement these reforms and whether such reforms will be effective at improving schooling in the United States, particularly for those students most at-risk.

In this article we explore whether educational systems have the institutional capacity to implement comprehensive, systemic reform, as envisioned in legislation such as NCLB. Drawing upon evidence from various state-level reform initiatives, we highlight the ways in which systemic reform appears to positively impact organizational change. However, we caution that systemic reform initiatives are uneven across the states and may produce unintended consequences, including perverse incentives to lower academic standards for students (i.e., redefining proficiency) to give the appearance of making adequate yearly progress toward systemic reform objectives.

Emergent Institutional Capacity

Scholars working within the paradigm of neo-institutional theory assert that comprehensive, large-scale policy interventions can be successful only if organizations have the institutional capacity to implement the intended reforms (Crowson, Boyd, & Mawhinney, 1996; Skocpol, 1992; Skowronek, 1982). Building this institutional capacity requires the reconstruction of institutional power relationships as they are negotiated (and contested) between and among various institutional actors (Skowronek, 1982). For example, in the past three decades, the influence of the federal and state governments over the nature, scope, and direction of education policy has increased dramatically, at the expense of local school boards, teachers unions, administrators, and PTAs.

Partly, this shifting power dynamic reflects national economic imperatives. However, it also reflects the increased growth and professionalization of federal and state government. Institutional scholars Robertson and Judd (1989) note that “over time, Congress and state legislatures, the president and state governors, and bureaucracies at all levels of government have grown larger, and more professional” (p. 10). Legislatures and their staffs have become more professionalized, and judicial interventions and gubernatorial initiatives have increased—all of which have enabled state governments to “use the means at their disposal to influence schooling at the local level” to a degree unprecedented in U.S. history (Firestone, 1990, p. 146; Kirst & Somers, 1981).

Successful Systemic Reform: Evidence from the States

The unique institutional context of policymaking in the U.S.—a federal system of shared, yet divided, power among three levels of government, with multiple access points at each level, coupled with a historical tradition of decentralized, local control—presents formidable challenges to implementing systemic reform. In their overview of systemic reform initiatives, Smith and

O'Day (1990) identified the "fragmented, complex, multi-layered educational policy system" in the U.S. as "a fundamental barrier to developing and sustaining successful schools" (p. 237). Despite these barriers, however, policymakers continue to try to craft more comprehensive, systemic education policy. Educational reformers at the federal, state, and local levels are "working to create coherent policy systems by aligning key policies to support demanding learning goals," as exemplified in the NCLB legislation (Spillane & Jennings, 1997, p. 450). The effort "to move away from the fragmented control system currently governing American education and to move toward closer coordination of policies about instructional goals, means, and funding" reflects the growing recognition that education is a national concern demanding state and national policy initiatives (Rowan & Miskel, 1999, p. 371).

Within the past two decades, every state has developed policies to raise academic standards, upgrade the school curriculum, improve teaching, and increase student performance (Doyle, Cooper, & Trachtman, 1991). Systemic reform initiatives have been undertaken in numerous states, including Vermont, Kentucky, South Carolina, and Texas (Fuhrman, 1993).

Florida, South Carolina, and California have developed comprehensive instructional design and curriculum frameworks (Cohen & Spillane, 1992). Every state except Iowa has a state mandated test, and 18 states require exit tests. Some states, such as Texas and North Carolina, have revised and improved their testing and accountability systems over time, indicating that some degree of systemic policy learning is occurring (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2001). Systemic reform initiatives offer a framework to enable school districts to align curriculum and instruction more effectively, which, it is hoped, will lead to improved student achievement (Koschoreck, 2001).

There is growing evidence that state and federal systemic reform efforts are having an impact on education at the local level. Spillane and Jennings (1997) found that under new state graduation requirements implemented during the reforms of the 1980s, middle and low achieving students took "significantly more academic courses, especially in mathematics and science" (p. 450). A number of studies in Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas document the effectiveness of systemic reform initiatives on increasing student achievement (See the National Governors Association, 2002). In a study of the effects of Texas' comprehensive accountability system on educational equity and student achievement, Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson (2000, 2001) found that individual schools, as well as entire school districts, are demonstrating improvement under the state's systemic reform policies. Disaggregating data to the student level provides teachers with reliable, longitudinal data on each student and enables them "to develop individual and small-group education plans to ensure mastery of areas of weakness from previous

years while also moving students forward in the state-mandated curriculum” (Sclafani, 2001, p. 307).

Texas’ systemic reform initiative appears to be improving student achievement, particularly among at-risk students. Fuller and Johnson (2001) note that, “Student performance in the TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills] has improved over the past several years” and “the gaps between the performances of different racial/ethnic/socioeconomic groups of students have diminished over time” in reading, writing, and math (Fuller & Johnson, 2001, p. 261). Fuller and Johnson conclude that the state’s systemic reform initiatives, principally its well-developed accountability system, played a central, catalytic role in improving the achievement of children of color and children from low-income households (see also Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2001).

Unresolved Issues and Continuing Challenges

Despite preliminary evidence of the success of systemic reform initiatives in some states, we must remember that states have made uneven progress in undertaking systemic reform. A report by the American Federation of Teachers (2001) found that no state had “a fully developed model curriculum—learning continuums, instructional resources, instructional strategies, performance indicators, lesson plans—in the four [major] subject areas” of English, math, social studies, and science (p. 6). Only nine states—Alabama, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia—had half or more of the components of a fully developed curriculum in place. Furthermore, only 23 states had more than 25 percent of a fully developed curriculum in place. Unfortunately, reforms such as NCLB treat all states as though they were at the same level of development. Although beyond the scope of this article, we would hypothesize that states with well-developed curriculum standards aligned with high-quality assessments, coupled with instructional support and resources, would fare better under NCLB than states that lack such provisions.

Furthermore, a significant difference exists between state-level systemic reform and national (or meta-level) systemic reforms such as NCLB that apply to all states. Under NCLB, each state is permitted to set its own standards and determine levels of proficiency (in effect, to set the bar), which makes nationwide comparisons difficult, given the considerable variability in state standards. For example, school officials in Iowa are already complaining that failure to meet the state’s high standards will result in more schools being labeled as failing, whereas states with lower standards will have far fewer schools failing to meet AYP targets (Witherspoon, 2003). If this occurs, an unintended consequence of NCLB may be to encourage some states to lower

their standards (to lower the bar), so that they can meet AYP targets and not be labeled as failing. Such actions become likely when a uniform meta-level systemic reform initiative is imposed on a system characterized by significant state-to-state variability.

Conclusion

In this article, we argued that the institutional environment of public education in the U. S. is becoming more centralized, with greater emphasis on and attention to systemic reform. Examples of this centralization of education policy include the development of curriculum standards within states, curriculum alignment, and ultimately the mandatory testing of all children in grades 3-8. Within the past quarter century, education has become increasingly tightly coupled (Weick, 1976). Meyer (1983) anticipated this change in institutional environment and referred to it as “fragmented centralization” (p. 181). That is, even as the American system grows more centralized, it remains fragmented by the very nature of a federal structure.

As this article suggests, educators in the United States are slowly, albeit unevenly, adapting to systemic reform, as state and federal policymakers, under renewed pressure for reform and equipped with greater institutional capacity, seek to craft more coherent education policy in a turbulent political arena. Although much progress has been made in implementing systemic reform nationwide, the fragmented nature of the educational system, with its long history of local control, continues to present significant barriers to those advocating a more nationalized educational system—as evidenced by reactions to the NCLB Act. While preliminary evidence suggests that systemic reform initiatives increase student achievement and may narrow the performance gaps among socioeconomic groups, to date such evidence is mostly anecdotal and based on a limited number of studies. Accordingly, we recommend that researchers carefully study the impact of these systemic reform initiatives on students (particularly ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups) and on the institutional changes occurring in the American educational system.

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